



THE UMPIONEERS

The word “umpire” comes from the French noumpere, meaning “a non-peer, not an equal, one who decides disputes between equals.” Or, as veteran ump Ron Luciano once put it, “Umpiring is best described as the profession of standing between two seven-year-olds with one ice-cream cone.”

FROM HONORABLE ARBITRATORS...

FSitting in a rocking chair behind the first-base line, wearing a top hat and Prince Albert coat, an attorney named William Wheaton became baseball's first umpire on October 6, 1845, during a practice game between his fellow teammates on the New York Knickerbockers. The game was much different back then—he didn't call balls and strikes (the pitcher still threw underhand), his job was to judge between “fair and unfair play.” Wheaton was typical of baseball's earliest umpires, often a member of one of the teams who volunteered to sit out and officiate. Sometimes a distinguished member of the crowd, perhaps a local judge, would be asked to call the game.

These umpires worked for free and were well respected. But when baseball went professional in the 1870s, the game became much more competitive, increasing the need for neutral observers to keep the peace on the field. The only option: *hire* umpires. Their life as “honorable arbitrators” was about to take an ugly turn.

...TO NO-GOOD BUMS

Calling the first game in National League history in 1876 was Billy McLean, a former bare-knuckle boxer. And he'd need that experience to handle what quickly became the most thankless (and often dangerous) job in baseball. Games were less formal back then: The fans sat much closer to the field, and the parks lacked today's tight security. McLean found himself in the position of single-handedly trying to control rowdy players, corrupt coaching staffs, and unforgiving fans, who often came to the park armed with an arsenal of rotting fruit. Adding even more pressure to umpires, it was their job to set fines for players who broke the rules. If a fine was considered too harsh, it was the ump—not the owners or the league office—who fans and players went after.

While many umpires retaliated, McLean simply strove to do his job and get home safely. But with each passing year he saw the hostility increase. It all came to a head at an exhibition game in Philadelphia in 1884. After a group of fans heckled him all afternoon, McLean walked over and threatened to “clean out the grandstand” if they didn’t lay off. They didn’t. After a few more taunts, McLean lost it: He picked up a bat and flung it into the seats, reportedly hitting an “innocent” man. A riot nearly ensued and McLean was arrested for assault. But since the fan was uninjured, the charges were dropped. Still, the league pressured McLean into writing an apology to Philadelphia fans. Instead of apologizing, however, he defended himself:

Goaded by uncalled-for, as well as unexpected taunts, I for a moment—and but for a moment—forgot my position as an umpire and did what any man’s nature would prompt if placed in a similar situation.... I urge managers to enforce the strictest order on their grounds, otherwise the death of an honest and manly game is in the near future.

McLean worked the remainder of the season, but quit after that, as fans, players, and coaches became even rowdier...and the owners turned a blind eye.

OUT OF CONTROL

McLean was fortunate to get out of the game when he did—the 1890s were brutal for the umpires. Team owners claimed to be opposed to disorder in the stands and on the field, but secretly supported the anti-umpire sentiment, believing it brought fans to the games...and increased profits. One of the most famous players of the day, Al Spalding, summed it up: “Fans who despise umpires are simply showing their democratic right to protest against tyranny.” A popular poem of the time, first printed in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1886, was called “Mother, May I Slug the Umpire”:

Let me clasp his throat, dear mother
 In a dear, delightful grip
 With one hand, and with the other
 Bat him several in the lip.

It’s no wonder that the turnover rate for early umpires was so high—despite a good salary of around \$5 per game, few were willing to risk their lives. Others, like Richard Higham, tried to supple-

ment their incomes by advising gamblers which team to bet on. In 1882 he became the only umpire ever to be banned for life... and provided yet another excuse for fans to jump on the “Kill the Umpire” bandwagon. (No accounts exist of an umpire getting killed by a fan or player, but many did suffer severe beatings.)

THE FATHER OF UMPIRES

The anti-umpire sentiment was so strong that professional baseball may not have survived had it not been for the efforts of a few key men. The first umpire to start turning things around was “Honest” John Gaffney. A former player who turned umpire in 1883, Gaffney quickly became known as one of the best, which wasn’t particularly difficult as most umps were poorly trained and disagreed on many basic rules. Working in more games than any other umpire in the 19th century, he realized that in order for his peers to gain respect, they had to start calling a better game. But to do that, they needed to know the rules...which changed often.

Take home runs—they were still quite rare, and the rules regarding them were murky. Gaffney began ruling that if a fly ball cleared the fence in fair territory, it was a home run even if it landed foul. More importantly, he called it that way consistently. At the end of each season, he sent a list of inconsistencies and proposed rule changes to the National League, many of which were put into play the following year.

Gaffney was also a part of baseball’s first two-man umpiring team, which took place in an 1887 postseason game. It didn’t become standard practice, though, so Gaffney improvised: He stayed behind the plate until a runner reached base, then he positioned himself behind the pitcher. These innovations and dedication earned Gaffney the title “Father of Umpires.” (He was also the first to wear a shirt with an oversize pocket to hold extra balls.)

GET A LITTLE CLOSER

Because there was no set strike zone until 1887 (and even then, no one could agree on it), it fell to the umpire’s judgement as to whether a pitched ball was hittable. The same was true for foul balls—they were called strikes only if the umpire thought the batter was attempting to put the ball into play.

Even with a set strike zone, umps still had a difficult time judg-

ing it because they positioned themselves a few feet behind the catcher and stood straight up, believing it gave them a better view of the field—as well as an extra split second in which to dodge foul tips. The first umpire to step up, so to speak, was Jack Sheridan, whose 18-year career began in 1890. Referred to by historians as the “prototype of the modern umpire,” Sheridan was the first to crouch directly behind the catcher, just above his shoulder, while the pitch was being thrown. He soon became known as the most accurate strike caller in the American League—and umps from both leagues adopted the crouch.

But that led to yet another problem: Foul tips were much harder to dodge from a crouch. Fed up with the bruises, Sheridan came up with a solution. He “borrowed” a leather-bound guest register from a hotel lobby and wore it under his shirt during a game, an innovation that developed into a standard piece of an umpire’s equipment—the chest protector.

BRUSH THEM OFF AND BAN THEM

Although Gaffney’s and Sheridan’s advancements improved the level of play, umpires were still alone out there, with neither the leagues nor the owners stepping in to discipline players. That began to change in 1898, when New York Giants owner John T. Brush introduced his “Brush Rules,” which threatened to ban a player for life if he struck an umpire or used “villainously foul language.” Did the Brush Rules work? Not really—the rules didn’t apply to umpires or coaches. Players complained that they should be held accountable as well. Meanwhile, not a single case ever reached Brush’s proposed discipline board.

Those questions were answered definitively by Byron Bancroft “Ban” Johnson, the first president of the American League, which he formed as “cleaner” alternative to the “raucous” N.L. “My determination was to pattern baseball in this new league along the lines of scholastic contests,” said Johnson, “to make ability, brains, and honorable play decide the issue—not the swinging of clenched fists, coarse oaths, riots, or assaults on the umpires.” Unlike Brush, Johnson tried appease both players *and* umpires:

- Johnson personally recruited player-friendly umps, starting with the highly respected Jack Sheridan as senior umpire, and urged them to stop retaliating against players and managers (such as

when umpire Tim Hurst followed New York Highlanders manager Clark Griffith into the tunnel after a game and knocked him out).

- In Johnson's A.L., fines would be imposed by the head office, not the umpires. That alone took a lot of pressure off the umps.
- Johnson made two-man umpiring teams standard for all games. With one calling balls and strikes and the other calling plays in the field, it made their jobs *much* easier. (It also made it a lot harder for players to cheat.) By 1912 both leagues had two-man crews.

In 1902 Johnson made an example of the Baltimore Orioles, notorious for their underhanded tricks, such as hiding extra baseballs in the outfield grass. Johnson attended many Orioles games, keeping tabs on player-manager John McGraw. After several clashes with the league's best umpires, McGraw was suspended indefinitely. Not wanting to play under Johnson's scrutiny, McGraw left Baltimore to play for the N.L. New York Giants, but he soon found that the National League wasn't as rowdy as it used to be. Johnson's efforts were having a profound effect on both leagues: Civility was returning. "His contribution to the game," said Branch Rickey, "is not closely equaled by any other single person or group of persons."

SAFE!

As a result, the new century was looking up for the men in blue. Bill Klem, whose 37-year umpiring career began in 1905, had a big part in that: He won fans over with his larger-than-life personality and legendary stubbornness—he *never* changed a call, even if he knew he blew it. It was Klem, nicknamed "the Old Arbitrator," who successfully lobbied for Sheridan's inside chest protector to be worn throughout the National League. Klem also popularized using arm signals to call balls and strikes. (The jowly Klem did have one major weakness: He hated being called "Catfish." More than a few rookies got tossed from games after seasoned veterans assured them that Klem *loved* the nickname.)

Thanks to Klem—and the pioneering men who came before him—baseball became a safer game, which led to a much better game. The 1930s saw the first umpire schools, the 1960s brought the umpires' union, and today professional baseball umps are among the best paid and most highly trained sports officials in the world...even if they still can't seem to agree on the strike zone.